

Islam & the West (including Manhattan)

Martin Kramer

ON A weekend in New York this past June, the Middle East Institute at Columbia University convened a conference with the title “Under Siege: Islam and Democracy.” Invitations to the conference spoke of a “gathering atmosphere of crisis” which had “stimulated in this country a sense of confrontation between Islam and democracy,” and which the organizers hoped their conference would help to “dispel.” That ominous atmosphere of crisis, the invitation asserted, had “most recently been fueled by reactions to the bombing of the World Trade Center” in February.

Thus, while downtown New York limped from a blast that had killed six, injured 1,000, and done half-a-billion-dollars’ worth of damage, uptown New York anguished over the “reactions” to the blast—as if they, and not the terrorist act itself, were what had inflamed the “crisis.” To the assembled academics, the worrisome “reactions” included, no doubt, any number of newspaper headlines in the style of “Muslim Arrested.”

But in point of fact, Muslims *had* been arrested—men whose commitment to their understanding of Islam provided motive for their acts. Within days of the bombing, evidence collected by the FBI had produced a strong *prima facie* case against a number of recent immigrants from Arab countries, who were duly arrested and charged. Prior to their arrest, the suspects had frequented the Jersey City mosque of Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, confidant of the assassins of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, who had been using his American pulpit to lambaste the West and preach Islamic revolution in Egypt. The press, the public, and agencies of public order thus had every reason to ask whether the bombing had been intended, by some stretch of logic, to serve the interests of Islam.

Fortunately, even as the participants at Columbia’s conference busily deconstructed the media’s putative bias against Islam, the authorities understood that the most dangerous possible effect

of the World Trade Center bombing was not offensive headlines or attacks by bigots against innocent Arab-Americans. It was more bombings. Their hunch resulted in the arrest of eight more of the Sheikh’s acolytes and translators, allegedly caught in the act of mixing fertilizer and diesel fuel, with which they intended to deconstruct UN and FBI headquarters, as well as the Lincoln and Holland tunnels. The Columbia conferees had hoped to “contribute to a *modus vivendi* between Islam and the West.” A week later, the FBI’s round of arrests made a more thorough contribution to just that end.

Through all this, it was hard to discern any serious effort to place the bombing and arrests in a credible context. Following the capture of the alleged conspirators in the UN bomb plot, New York Mayor David Dinkins adopted what by then had become the characteristic tone of evasion. In warning New Yorkers against projecting “outrage onto the whole community from which these individuals came,” the mayor did his civic duty. But he leaped headlong into surmise when he determined that “these are individuals acting on their own, or in concert among other criminal collaborators.” In fact, there was every likelihood that the bombing plot was political as well as criminal, and that its political context extended far beyond New York.

Dinkins could be excused—he was out of his depth—but many of America’s academic interpreters of Islam, at the Columbia conference and elsewhere, in effect seconded such evasions. Some simply averred that the bombing and the foiled conspiracy, even if hatched by Muslims, had nothing to do with any extant reading of Islam. Some offered that the bombing was the work of “extremists,” and that the only way to undermine them was by supporting “moderates.” (On further elaboration, these “moderates” often turned out to be other Islamic fundamentalists, who may have drawn the line at blowing up skyscrapers and traffic tunnels but otherwise subscribed to the same principles as the “extremists.”) One instant expert, writing in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, confidently categorized the bombing as an “isolated event” which only “frus-

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trated cold warriors," sold on an "Islamic conspiracy theory," could possibly tie to other events like terrorist attacks in Egypt.

IN SHORT, conventional wisdom decreed that the bombing occurred in a vacuum: it was pathological, not political. This abdication on the part of the professional interpreters of Islam left it to the investigative press to draw an outline of the suspects' murky world. Intensified reportage from New York, Khartoum, and Cairo began to untangle an informal but far-flung network of Islamic activism—a network which most academic experts had denied even existed. Many of the threads led by twists and turns back to Afghanistan, where Arab Muslim money and volunteers had contributed to the successful *jihad* against Soviet forces in the 1980's.

This reportage also raised an issue that has yet to be addressed: the extent to which the U.S., which also backed the Afghan *jihad*, coddled its Arab veterans with visas and other protection after the war ended. Sheikh Abdel-Rahman himself had been a fund-raiser and meddler in Afghanistan. The State Department's lame explanation for his (repeated) entries into the U.S.—a computer error—suggested a preference for evasion in government as well.

In any case, were it not for the press, whose coverage of Islam is routinely maligned for its supposed bias, none of these fascinating lines of inquiry would have been opened up. A public hungry for analysis would have had to subsist only on the thin gruel of banalities served up by the scholars.

That which American academics and officials evaded, many Arab interpreters openly denied. They professed astonishment that anyone could attribute the planning or execution of such an attack to any Arab or Muslim. Rather than admit even the remote possibility, they did what they have long done: they blamed the Mossad, Israel's secret service, or they simply blamed the Jews.

This view was not confined to the fundamentalist fringe press (where it flourished). It also surfaced in some of the leading newspapers in the Arab world. The columnists of the Cairo daily *al-Ahram*, which purports to be the most respected of Arab newspapers, led the charge. One writer announced with certainty that "the Islamic groups could not have carried out such an action," because it "would have such serious repercussions for them. Many of them could find no better place than the West, and particularly the United States, to take refuge in." Nor could any Palestinian have done it, for the same reasons. But Israel, the writer went on, had long sought to tarnish the image of the Arabs, and to undermine Arab and Muslim communities in Europe and America through its agents. The conclusion:

"Look for Israel's and the Mossad's hand in this dirty operation."

Another columnist in *al-Ahram* called the plotters behind the bombing both "devilish and clever," since they had found in Muhammad Salameh, the principal suspect, someone combining the perfect features of a fall guy: he was a Palestinian, at one time he carried an Egyptian passport, and he belonged to a group of Muslim extremists. "Some widespread international planning must have gone into finding this needle in the haystack," the writer insinuated, and then supplied the clue:

The only way to put the puzzle together is to resort to the Israeli Mossad. It alone is capable of deciphering the act, pinpointing the real culprits, and revealing the real objectives behind this terrorist action, which ultimately serves only one party—which is, coincidentally or not, Israel itself.

If the responsible Arab press fingered the Mossad, others in the Arab world glared accusingly at the inhabitants of New York, who deserved divine retribution. Hezbollah's radio in Lebanon offered this commentary: "We have the right to ask about the crazy and shameless residents of New York, its gangsters, nightclubs, and brothels. The answer emerges very clearly that the explosion that rocked New York merely expressed its identity." This apocalyptic vision gained respectability in a column in the Beirut daily *al-Safir*, the newspaper that is supposed to represent the views of the serious, progressive Left:

New York is the city of crime, the Mafia, and organized gangsters who are stronger than armies. It is the jungle where one cannot move without fearing for one's life. New York is the capital of the Jews with all their perversions, including politics, sex, media, forgery, cinema, drugs, and money laundering. It is the greatest arena for crime, most terrible fortress of discrimination, and ugliest example of class and race oppression.

New Yorkers, the columnist concluded, were thus in no position to claim that terror came to their city only when the "dark-skinned and red-eyed Arabs appeared."

THE press of Cairo and Beirut will continue to debate whether the bombing of the World Trade Center was a Mossad plot or a blast of hellfire. But for the people most at risk, the question is whether the bombing was indeed the disembodied work of individual criminals, cut loose from any known reading of Islam. Those who take this view may imagine that they are promoting interfaith understanding, but it is an approach that misses the bombing's import entirely—and perhaps helps to invite its repetition.

There is a wider context. The Magjid al-Salaam mosque in Jersey City stands at the far edge of a vast pool of resentment in Islam, fed by a steady stream of fundamentalist complaint against the West in general and the United States in particular. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the survival of the United States as the sole great power, the slogan of a “new world order”—these developments have brought that pool of resentment to overflowing. The bombing should be read as a warning: that a part of Islam dissents from the new ascendancy of the United States. Evasion and denial will not make this animus disappear.

The first context to be grasped is the world inhabited by the defendants in the bombing and conspiracy. As fundamentalists and immigrants, they personify the discontent that afflicts much of Islam today. For fundamentalism and migration have been the two major avenues of escape from the desperate crisis that now besets Muslim countries. They are also the two major sources of friction between Islam and the West. It is at the points of overlap between them, in storefront mosques from Brooklyn, New York, to Bradford, England, that angry preaching wins an especially attentive hearing.

For growing numbers of the young, the poor, and the credulous in the lands of Islam, fundamentalism has provided both escape and hope in circumstances that grow more dire with each passing year. These movements express a widespread frustration at the inability of regimes to deliver on the promise of a quantum leap to power and prosperity, whether by imitation of the Soviet model or by mimicry of capitalism. In appealing to that frustration, fundamentalists propose to abandon all the political and social models of the West. Instead, raising the slogan “Islam is the solution,” they offer the vague but alluring ideas of Islamic government and Islamic economics. Most importantly, they hold the West responsible for the present malaise of Islam—a malaise that is understood to be the result of a deliberate Western effort to destroy Islam.

So far, this brand of fundamentalism has seized power only in Islamic lands more distant from the West—Iran in the heart of Asia, Sudan in the heart of Africa. But recently Islamic fundamentalism has made impressive gains on the Muslim shores of the Mediterranean, especially in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey. These are the Muslim societies closest to the West in geography and culture, and the spread of fundamentalism there is compelling evidence for the depth of the crisis in Islam. The zealots have yet to acquire power in a Mediterranean country, but they have come close in Algeria, and they may yet make a serious bid in Egypt.

Muslim immigration to the West has been an equally telling sign of crisis. This immigration, especially to Western Europe and North America,

is a result of the vast asymmetry of opportunity between the economies of the West and Islam. Since decolonization, the movement of millions of Muslims has rapidly transformed Islam into the second religion in much of the West. The influx continues unabated, as the fast-growing populations of Muslim countries far outstrip productive capacity.

In recent years, this immigration has taken on a new character, drawing upon more traditional classes in Muslim societies. For the newer immigrants, seeking a livelihood in the lands of unbelief is not without social stigma. Many of them have justified their choice by renouncing acculturation—this, at a time when economic recession in the West has diminished the willingness of host societies to assimilate foreigners anyway. The result has been a backlash of bigotry, epitomized by the repeated and sometimes deadly attacks on Muslim foreigners in Germany.

The prevalence of fundamentalism among more recent Muslim immigrants has tempted fundamentalist states and movements to open a second front in their struggle for political and cultural domination at home. The Paris bomb attacks of 1985 and 1986, the agitation against Salman Rushdie in Britain, and the bombing of the World Trade Center have uncovered remote outposts of Muslim resentment in the West which are highly susceptible to suggestion by fundamentalists abroad.

To be sure, the vast majority of Muslim immigrants to the West, including fundamentalists, have come in search of opportunity, and would never imagine committing acts of political violence. But there are those who simply await a word of encouragement or inspiration offered by a visiting cleric or foreign diplomat. This is an unpleasant truth, but one which must no longer be ignored by immigration services, law-enforcement agencies, and organized Muslim communities themselves.

THE second, broader context of the bombing has to do with what might be called the fundamentalists’ narrative of history. According to this narrative, the grand objective, first of Christendom and then of the West, has been the subordination, if not the destruction, of Islam. The medieval Crusades represented the first attempt; but Islam contained and repelled that aggression, which ultimately left no trace. Modern European imperialism, a far more dynamic force, constituted the next attempt; this proved far more successful, bringing nearly all of Islam under European rule. But while Europe promptly stole the wealth and independence of Muslims, it did not succeed in destroying their identity. The tenacious preservation of their identity has given them the power to rise up in wars of resistance, to reclaim their formal independence and control of their resources.

But now—the narrative continues—Islam faces the most dangerous and insidious challenge yet: America, as heir to Europe and hence to the role of leader of disbelief against Islam, has produced a model of culture, society, and politics which pretends to universal validity. This model exercises so seductive an appeal that it threatens to bring about what one fundamentalist thinker has called “the extinction of the distinctive identity of the Islamic community.” This final assault on Islam is now concealed beneath the American slogan of a “new world order.”

Rashid al-Ghannushi, exiled leader of the Tunisian Islamic movement, puts the case most succinctly. The “new world order,” he says,

is even more oppressive and severe than the old world order, which tried to banish Islam and ruin it. For the first time, the United Nations has become a real international government with a president—none other than the President of the United States. It has a legal branch to endorse American decisions—the Security Council—and an executive branch, in the form of the U.S. military. It has a financial apparatus—the World Bank and other giant financial institutions—and it has a massive media machine. Government by the United Nations is really government by the United States, which is the main characteristic of the “new world order.” This “new world order,” from the point of view of its intellectual content, its ideology, and its religion, isn’t new. It is simply American hegemony over the world, clothed in the ideology of human rights.

This kind of logic no doubt lay behind the choice of the United Nations as the target of the second bomb plot. Ghannushi, it should be added, is presented by his Western apologists as the most moderate and least anti-American fundamentalist leader.

In the fundamentalist narrative, Muslims are not without their defenses against the “new world order.” The hope has been most effectively articulated by Sayid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, mentor and oracle of Lebanon’s Hezbollah. His purpose has been to persuade Muslims that “reports about the multifaceted and unrivaled strength of the United States are greatly exaggerated.” While America looms large, “its shadow is greater than its substance. It possesses great military power, but that power is not supported by commensurate political or economic strength.” Even its much-touted democracy is deeply flawed. And so the collapse of the Soviet Union, far from confirming American power, only presages its fall. Within a generation or two, America will lose its power, and Islam will begin to realize its own massive potential.

“Power is not the eternal destiny of the powerful,” Fadlallah reminds the faithful. “Weakness is not the eternal destiny of the weak. We may not have the actual power the U.S. has, but we had

the power previously and we have now the foundations to develop that power in the future.” Islam might even end by bringing America and Europe into its fold; already, the spread of Islam into these areas

represents a great problem for the arrogant powers that seek to preserve the status quo and their own character. We should remember that Hülegü [the Mongol conqueror of Baghdad in 1258] overwhelmed the lands of Islam, but Islam overwhelmed the minds of his descendants, who became Muslims. Their power became Islamic power. I believe it is possible that Islam will storm many of the bastions that are now a danger to Islam, turning them to the benefit of Islam.

AMERICA’S assault on Islamic identity, its bloated power cloaked as a “new world order,” its hidden vulnerabilities, Islam’s ultimate triumph, the final conversion of America—millions have been irradiated by this narrative, which might well have served as the underlying motif for the bombing of the World Trade Center. When the FBI arrested Muslims for the bombing, Fadlallah himself was quick to blame Israel and “Jewish circles in the United States.” Yet he, and many other fundamentalist theoreticians, had been assuring Muslims repeatedly that if they looked, they would find “chinks in the armor of the United States, and we can penetrate these chinks and enlarge them.” It could have come as no surprise to him that some Muslims living in the United States overheard these admonitions and acted upon them.

An Iranian commentator put the bombing precisely in the context of the fundamentalist narrative. Asadollah Badamchian, the deputy head of the Iranian judiciary for political affairs, and a well-known hardliner, wrote an analysis that was published the day *before* the arrest of Muhammad Salameh, when no one could yet make the damaging association between the bombing and Islam:

If the United States cannot safeguard even one floor of the most important building in the heart of New York, how can [it] ever put into practice the foolish policy of Bush—the establishment of a new world order or a new chapter of U.S. domination?

And Badamchian concluded:

Even though initially tyranny inflicts anguish on the oppressed, ultimately divine wrath gives the devout persons the upper hand and they annihilate the tyrant.

That the seemingly omnipotent U.S. was vulnerable at its heart, and that the “new world order” could be stopped—this was the message the fundamentalists were reading into the bombing before the evidence began to point precisely in their direction.

PARADOXICALLY, of course, and thanks to the arrests, the bombing had the opposite of its intended effect. Fundamentalists who would have been only too glad to hammer home Badamchian's point about American vulnerability instead had to denounce the bombing, blame it on Israel, and declare the United States off-limits to their struggle. Even Sheikh Abdel-Rahman, who was later indicted for, among other things, ordering the bombing, pronounced it incompatible with Islam. In the end, a chorus of fundamentalist voices affirmed the immunity of American soil.

The American response to the bombing also belied the fundamentalist portrayal of the United States as arch foe of the Muslims. The Egyptian fundamentalist newspaper *al-Nur* ran a commentary acknowledging that there was no popular wave of retribution against American Muslims, no random arrests, no mass interrogations, no storming of mosques in search of terrorists—the opposite, in fact, of what usually occurs in Egypt. Even the suspects “were treated in a civilized manner, and their lawyers were allowed to be present with them as soon as they were arrested.” The simple workings of due process conveyed an image of immense power. So did the endless footage on Arab and Muslim television of the skyline of New York, unaltered by the bombing. In the end, ironically, one lasting effect of the bombing and trial may be to fill Arabian nights with many more dreams of Manhattan.

But Manhattan's own nightmare could recur. The fundamentalist struggle continues back in the capitals of Islam. It has lasted for nearly two decades, and its outcome is still far from decided. The Shah of Iran, one nemesis of the fundamentalists, is gone, but other secular kings and presidents rule on. Women are returning to the veil in Egypt, but a woman has become prime minister of Turkey. Islam, in short, remains divided against itself, and seems to be moving toward a civil war between two antagonistic blocs—social blocs within countries, and strategic blocs among states. The dividing issue is whether or not Islam should exist as a closed system, in constant tension with the world. The United States

has obvious preferences in this struggle, and it is always possible that it may be threatened for holding them. It would therefore be foolish to rely on fundamentalist denunciations of this latest bombing. They were made under extreme duress.

Two bits of truth lie beneath the bomb rubble and should be embedded in the wall of Western defense. First, no one has the clairvoyance to sort the “moderates” from the “extremists.” Those Arabs who waged *jihad* in Afghanistan, including some of the defendants now on trial, were supposed to be America's domesticated fundamentalists. They were often cited as prime evidence that not all Muslim fundamentalists are anti-American, that they are a “politically ‘tamable’” force, in the words of one former CIA analyst. But as the World Trade Center bombing suggests, the conduct even of those fundamentalists who were once American allies and clients cannot be predicted, even in the short term. In dealing with Islamic fundamentalism, the United States now has an obligation to its own citizenry to err on the side of caution.

Second, the systematic preaching of hatred eventually will produce violence. Even if others strike the detonator, the kind of vitriol against America so widely retailed by the likes of Sheikh Abdel-Rahman is the fuel. And even if, in the trial of the alleged plotters in the New York bombing, the court should rule that the defendants acted alone, they are not lone men. They belong to a society with its own code, which they call true Islam, and whose interpreters have condemned America as the seat of evil.

As the bombing trials unfold, those who have made blithe assurances about “Islamism” would do well to reexamine the content and appeal of this code. The more they continue to evade hard truths, the more their credibility is bound to be questioned by the press and public alike. As for government, the case of the Sheikh should be a reminder that the preaching of hatred is still protected speech in America—which is why it is vital to keep such preachers at a safe distance from America's shores, even when they claim to bear the divine message of Islam.